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'I was just happy to work, and Mother Teresa saw that in me.'

Leaving her mark

Dipa Sarkar has contributed much to the communities she's touched, from caring for patients in Calcutta to donating ideas, time and treasures to enrich our culture in Terre Haute

WORDS: **KASY LONG**

PHOTOGRAPHY: **JOSEPH C. GARZA**

Imagine meeting Mother Teresa before she became Mother Teresa. Instead, she was an ordinary Catholic nun and missionary who joined others in caring for patients suffering from leprosy, tuberculosis and the then-unclassified HIV/AIDS virus at a community health center in Calcutta, India.

One of the other concerned caregivers was a hard-working medical student, Dipa Sarkar. She treated 75 leprosy patients under Mother Teresa's careful observations. Sarkar didn't ask for monetary compensation for her dedicated service, much to Mother Teresa's amazement and delight.

Besides her work in the fields of gynecology and pathology, Dr. Dipa Sarkar has been a cultural trailblazer in Terre Haute's Indian community. Here, she poses for a photo in October at her apartment at Westminster Village. Dipa and her husband, Anil, were one of the first Indian families to settle in Terre Haute. A portrait of herself and Anil (above, right) hangs in her apartment.





Dipa Sarkar led efforts to dedicate a tree and plaque on the Indiana State University campus in 1978 that celebrated Mahatma Gandhi's 100th birthday. A re-dedication ceremony took place (above) in 2017. (Submitted photo)

"I was just happy to work, and Mother Teresa saw that in me," says Sarkar, a longtime Terre Haute resident and retired gynecologist/pathologist.

Years later, the two India natives crossed paths again when Sarkar assisted Mother Teresa in caring for children that were traveling to Belgium. However, this time the then-recognized Catholic saint wasn't going to let Sarkar leave without a small gift in gratitude for her commitment to helping others: a beautiful replica of Mother Teresa's Catholic rosary.

Sarkar held onto this priceless treasure for decades until July 2017, when she and her daughter, Rumu Sarkar, donated the rosary to Saint Mary-of-the-Woods College. In 2013, the college had presented Dipa with the institution's President's Aspire Higher award, and she felt the Catholic college was the best place to donate the precious reminder of her volunteer experiences with Mother Teresa.

"It was time to give [the rosary] a new life," Sarkar said.

Rumu added, "We thought about what would happen in the next 40 to 50 years: would we want the rosary to be stored away in a closet? Or, would it be better for us to display the rosary in a public setting for others to see? Saint

Mary-of-the-Woods was the obvious answer."

Mother Teresa's rosary is on public display daily in the Formal Parlor of Le Fer Hall on the campus in western Vigo County.

Dipa was born outside Calcutta in 1931, and she began her medical career in her native country. A pathology medical residency in the United States eventually led her to Terre Haute in 1969. She had her own local pathology practice and taught medical technology courses at Indiana State University for several

Dr. Dipa Sarkar worked with Mother Teresa as a young medical student in Calcutta. Here, Sarkar poses for a photo at Westminster Village in October.





At left, Mother Teresa gifted Dipa Sarkar with a replica of her rosary. Sarkar donated the priceless treasure in July of 2017 to Saint Mary-of-the-Woods College. It is now on display in the Formal Parlor of Le Fer Hall on campus. Above, Rumu Sarkar, in a portrait with her mother, Dipa. (Submitted photos)

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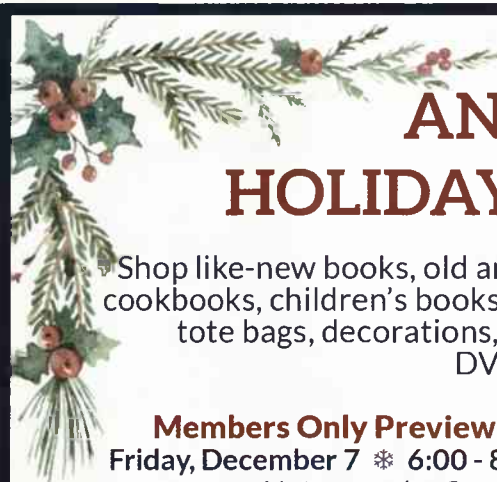
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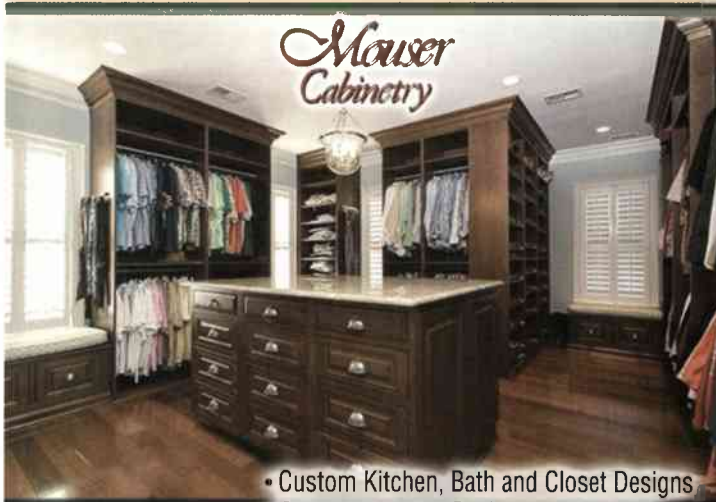
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Dipa Sarkar led efforts to dedicate a tree and plaque on the Indiana State University campus in 1978 that celebrated Mahatma Gandhi's 100th birthday. A re-dedication ceremony took place in 2017. At right, is the plaque. Opposite, below, Dipa and daughter, Rumu Sarkar, pose near the tree during the 2017 ceremony. Opposite, left, Saint Mary-of-the-Woods College President Dottie King and Dipa talk about the rosary. (Submitted photos)

years. Along the way Sarkar reached out to other Indian natives living throughout the Wabash Valley, and became the first president of Terre Haute's India Association. She led the organization's efforts to dedicate a tree and plaque on the ISU campus in 1970 that celebrated Mahatma Gandhi's 100th birthday. The tree and plaque were rededicated by the Sarkar family in 2017.

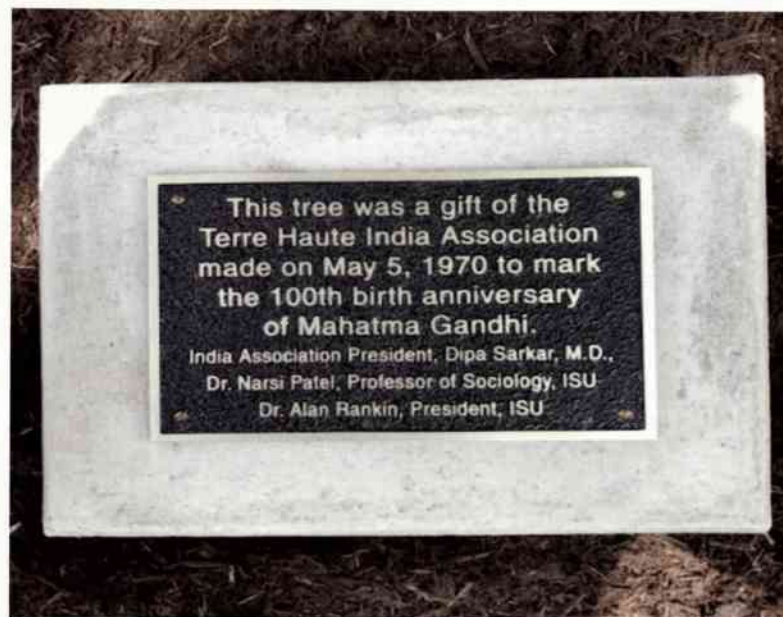
"It was a wonderful ceremony and much needed for the Terre Haute community," Rumu said.

After stepping aside from her medical practice, Dipa continued to serve the community by helping those in need through volunteering and taking leadership roles in a variety of charities. She also taught English classes and wrote several articles for the Terre Haute Tribune-Star as a historian at the Vigo County Public Library.

And because of her historical background, Sarkar has witnessed 50 years of cultural change in Terre Haute. When Dipa moved to Terre Haute in 1969 with her husband and young daughter, they were one of the first Indian families to put forth their own roots in the community.

Yes, Dipa acknowledges that Terre Haute continues to make positive strides to include all cultures into making the community a place that embraces diversity and inclusivity.

"It's much better now. There are many more Indian families and I'm happy to see that," Dipa reflected.



But, as Rumu is quick to point out, much of the community's growing Indian culture is because of the efforts of her mother and father.

"Ask anyone and they'll say the Sarkars paved the path for today's Indian families," Rumu said.

Whether Dipa Sarkar has provided care to an ill patient, lent a helping hand as a volunteer, educated others about local history or merely donated priceless memorabilia, she has left a distinguished mark on the world around her.

Mother Teresa would be pleased.

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